



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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WOODPECKERS, PRIVATE LANDOWNERS SHARE HOMES
UNDER NEW "SAFE HARBOR" CONSERVATION PLAN

Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt today proposed a first-of-its kind conservation plan that will help endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers find safe homes on private lands.

"This proposal uses the flexibility of the current Endangered Species Act to introduce a new conservation concept that we call 'Safe Harbor,'" Babbitt said. "It offers private landowners an incentive to be good stewards of their land and provide habitat for endangered and threatened species. In exchange, they get an ironclad guarantee that they will not be subject to restrictions later on if they succeed in attracting endangered species to their land. This proposal serves as a model for new ways to work with private landowners to resolve concerns about endangered species, not only in North Carolina but across the country."

Joining Secretary Babbitt for the announcement were Michael Bean, chair of the Environmental Defense Fund's wildlife program, and Brad Kocher, director of golf course and grounds maintenance at the Pinehurst Resort and Country Club in North Carolina.

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"This 'Safe Harbor' habitat conservation plan (HCP) breaks new ground," said Michael Bean of the Environmental Defense Fund. "Not only is it the first HCP of its kind anywhere in the nation, but it offers a new way of working with private landowners on behalf of the red-cockaded woodpecker, which occurs in thirteen southeastern States. This plan removes the disincentives that currently prevent most landowners from carrying out actions that could benefit the woodpecker."

A number of private landowners are expected to join the program, including the 100-year-old Pinehurst Resort and Country Club. The resort operates seven golf courses including world-famous Pinehurst No. 2, which hosted the U.S. Senior Open Championship in 1994 and will host the U.S. Open in 1999.

"Pinehurst is excited to be the first private landowner to sign on to this new proposed habitat conservation plan," Kocher said. "We knew the golfers like our courses but we were happy to learn that woodpeckers find them a good substitute for their disappearing natural habitat. We're pleased to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to enhance their habitat."

The plan, officially known as the North Carolina Sandhills Habitat Conservation Plan, was developed under the Endangered Species Act to benefit the conservation of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker through voluntary habitat improvements by private landowners. The Sandhills HCP differs from other habitat conservation plans because it is designed to encourage positive habitat improvements, in advance of any specific project that could adversely affect an endangered species. Other HCP's have been intended to offset or "mitigate" some adverse impact to endangered species that occurs as a result of a development already planned.

The endangered red-cockaded woodpecker occurs in North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Virginia, Alabama, Oklahoma and Texas. The bird prefers to live in older pine forests, primarily longleaf pine, where it nests in cavities that it excavates in living trees. It is threatened by destruction of longleaf pine forests which once covered nearly 92 million acres but now total less than 4 million acres.

Most of the woodpecker's remaining habitat occurs on Federal lands, but 21 percent of the birds are found on private lands. Some private landowners have been concerned that they would be subject to restrictions under the Endangered Species Act if woodpeckers take up residence on their property. By removing this concern, the

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"Safe Harbor" plan will encourage conservation and restoration of longleaf pine habitat, which will in turn help increase woodpecker populations and eventually lead to recovery from their current endangered status.

The proposed plan will work like this: participating landowners will sign a cooperative agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service, agreeing to take actions such as clearing hardwood understory trees that attract red-cockaded woodpecker competitors and predators or installing artificial nest cavities in pine trees that will benefit red-cockaded woodpeckers. Landowners who help restore longleaf pines can benefit from sale of pine straw, which is valuable in landscaping. So long as landowners protect existing birds on their properties and carry out the agreed upon habitat improvements, they may develop, harvest trees upon, or make other use of the property even if such use incidentally results in the loss of any additional red-cockaded woodpeckers that are attracted to the land by the pro-active management measures. If in the future the landowner wishes to do something else with the land, the presence of endangered species using the improved habitat will not prevent him or her from doing so. Landowners will, however, be required to give the Fish and Wildlife Service an opportunity to capture and move any affected woodpeckers. If the landowner sells the land, the buyer would have the same protection or "safe harbor" as the seller. Also, no new restrictions would be placed on a participating landowners' neighbor. The conservation agreements do not apply to woodpeckers that exist on a landowners' property at the time the agreement is signed.

Even if a landowner decides not to continue participating in the program, the favorable habitat conditions created will not necessarily cease. They may persist for many years unless the landowner decides to eliminate them. If the program continues for an extended period of time, such as 99 years, with new land parcels constantly coming under agreement as older agreements for other lands expire, the net effect will be a shifting matrix of private lands being managed for woodpecker conservation, with a gain for the species. Even if all participating landowners drop out, the worst that could happen is a return to circumstances that existed without the plan. Meanwhile, the plan would have temporarily halted or reversed the fragmentation of woodpecker habitat, strengthened or created dispersal corridors, and contributed some offspring that may reoccupy previously abandoned nest sites or that may be relocated to lands protected by longer-term conservation agreements.

The North Carolina Sandhills occupy parts of six counties in south-central North Carolina (Cumberland, Harnett, Hoke, Moore, Richmond,

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and Scotland). The area is one of the few areas of private land remaining with extensive stands of longleaf pines. Fort Bragg provides most of the habitat for the woodpeckers in the Sandhills area (215 woodpecker groups), but about 25 percent of woodpecker groups in the Sandhills occur on private lands close to Fort Bragg. The remainder occur on State lands. The Sandhills area is one of 15 sites where the Fish and Wildlife Service is trying to establish and protect viable woodpecker populations, described as 250 reproducing groups (family units, usually consisting of a breeding pair and one or more helpers). To achieve that goal, about 400 potential breeding groups need to be established, because all pairs do not reproduce each year.

In addition to the "Safe Harbor" program, the Fish and Wildlife Service is currently negotiating nine other habitat conservation plans for the red-cockaded woodpecker and has signed three memoranda of agreement with industrial forest landowners. Two others are nearly completed, and two more are in negotiation.

The proposed Carolina Sandhills HCP was published in the Federal Register on February 24, 1995. Public comments are invited over the next 30 days and should be addressed to: Regional Permit Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1875 Century Blvd., Suite 200, Atlanta, Georgia 30345. Copies of the plan may be obtained at the same address or by writing to the Sandhills Red-cockaded Woodpecker Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 225 N. Bennett St., Southern Pines, North Carolina 28388.

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